



PKSOI Book Review

Review of The Starfish and the Spider
by Ori Brafman and Rod A. Beckstrom

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If you cut off a spider's head, or several legs, it dies; however, if you cut off a starfish's arms, or cut it in half, it grows. In fact, due to redundancies and common traits found throughout its' structure, each piece can itself grow into an entirely new starfish. Traditional, hierarchical organizations are like spiders; but now starfish organizations are changing the face of business and the world. Entities like eBay, Skype, and Wikipedia are changing the way the world works.

Authors Ori Brafman and Rod A. Beckstrom's small (200 pages), easy to read book on business provides tremendous insights into the differences between hierarchical (traditional) and decentralized organizations. The principles of decentralized organizations in the book touch on movements as diverse as Alcoholics Anonymous, the Apache Native American tribes in the 1880s-1900s, the Anti-slavery movement in Europe and the US in the 1800s, as well as Al Qaeda today. It is for this reason that we commend this book to military professionals and strategic thinkers.

The Starfish and the Spider describes the ascent of starfish organizations (and the examples found in the book are older than you think!), the descent of spider organizations in a world of starfish, and what happens when a spider takes on a starfish. This book reveals how established spider companies, from IBM and GM to the US Government and the military, are learning to incorporate "starfish principles" into their organization.

The five common principles found in all starfish organizations are listed below. As a

start, as you read them, pause and consider what you know or have read about Al Qaeda and its affiliates, terrorist cells in general, and/ or IED networks...

The five characteristics of starfish organizations are:

- 1) Circles – small, nonhierarchical groups, each group maintains similar habits and norms – common heritage, tradition. If there are more than 14 members, trust and bonds break down. Circles depend on norms - as norms develop, so does trust.
- 2) Catalyst – someone who gets the organization going, then cedes control – he/she is an inspirational figure who spurs others to action, but relinquishes any centralized notion of being, for example, ‘the President of the Internet’, as the French unsuccessfully struggled to find back in the early 1990s.
- 3) Ideology – a common belief – the glue that holds decentralized organizations together.
- 4) The Preexisting Network – a preexisting platform of norms, ideology, motivations. Today, the Internet serves the same function as the religious group known as the Quakers did back in the early 1800s for the the anti-slavery movement (a starfish organization): a platform on the back of which a wide variety of starfish organizations can be launched. The Internet is far more open and accessible, so the proliferation of communities and networks like Craigslist, eMule, and Skype is enabled by this preexisting network.
- 5) The Champion – someone who is relentless in promoting the idea; such catalysts are charismatic; champions take it to the next level. The spokesman, the ‘face’ of the movement.

This book goes on to describe three ways to ‘take on’ a starfish organization: one can defeat or counter the momentum of a starfish by changing its ideology, by getting the organization to centralize (by co-opting their catalysts through some means), or by decentralizing your own operations to (out) match the starfish’s.

Vivid, true stories serve as examples of each of these techniques.

The subtitle about 'leaderless organizations' may prickle most professional audiences, but the point is simply that leadership is decentralized, encourage worker/ teammate empowerment and free-thinking with free-flowing and instant communication at nodes (circles) far distant from any physical "headquarters."

The bottom line of the book resounds: In the decentralized revolution, whether in business, counterterrorist operations, or defeating IED networks, hierarchical and traditional strategies do not, and increasingly, will not work. GEN McChrystal was spot-on when he said that killing one insurgent may spawn 20 new ones – we must look beyond the 'whack- a- mole' methodology and discover new strategies.

Authors Biography

John Bessler became the Division Chief, Security, Reconstruction, and Transitions (SRT) for PKSOI in August 2009 after 14 months in Herat, Afghanistan, where he commanded the Afghan Regional Security Integration Command, Western Provinces (ARSIC-West). In that position, he worked and fought side-by-side with Afghan and NATO forces while training Afghan Army and Afghan Police forces during 2008 and 2009. He worked intimately and regularly with NATO forces both in a mentoring as well as in a combat capacity, and even more routinely with United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and Department of State representatives, four Provincial Reconstruction Teams from as many countries, as well as routine contacts with DIA, CIA, the Joint Interagency Task Force (Counter Narcotics), and Special Operations Forces (USA and USMC.) He previously served as the Operations Officer for the US contingent of the Multinational Forces and Observers (MFO) team in the Sinai, Egypt. He has a Masters Degree of Science in Administration from Central Michigan University and a Bachelors Degree of Science in Biology from the College of William and Mary in Virginia. He earned a Masters Degree in Strategic Studies from the US Army Ware College at Carlisle, and graduated in 1998 from Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, KS. He is an infantry officer, and has experience in mechanized, light, and airborne assignments. He graduated as

a Distinguished Military Graduate from Reserve Officers' Training Corps at William and Mary in 1985. He has commanded thru battalion command, is joint qualified and commanded Combined Forces in Afghanistan throughout an area of operations roughly the size of Mississippi.